

# SCOTT SMITH

## Wildlife Ecologist

By Ana Berninger



It's a busy time of the year for Scott Smith. From monitoring invasive species to protecting endangered ones, the DNR Wildlife ecologist is out getting his feet wet in a variety of activities.

Smith works out of the Eastern Region Wildlife and Heritage office where he specializes in reptile and amphibian research and education. He is one of the few Maryland DNR herpetologists monitoring their population and distribution.

During early spring and summer, Smith conducts tiger salamander egg mass counts, monitors the federally threatened bog turtle, and helps answer important ecological questions, like *Is this an unknown species? Is it invasive?*

In a recent project, Smith studied a newly discovered population of *siren* — an eel-like salamander — found in Lake Artemesia in Prince George's County.

He also helped coordinate the Maryland Reptile and Amphibian Atlas, a five-year, citizen-science project documenting the distribution of these species across the state.

He chairs the Maryland Diamondback Terrapin Working Group, a non-profit created to promote conservation strategies for protecting the terrapin — a cause very close to his heart.

While not endangered, says Smith, "Terrapins are an umbrella species for estuaries and the Chesapeake Bay. They live in the water, along the shoreline and on land, and they're a good indicator for other species' health."

Smith is involved with the statewide terrapin headcount, which uses data from citizen scientists who look for concentration areas. He also conducts surveys to determine the effects of incidental catches from crab pots.

All recreational crabbers are required to install turtle excluder devices — wire rectangle frames that prevent terrapins from entering through the opening of the pot, while still allowing room for crabs.

"We help educate bait shops to sell pots with these devices already on them," explains Smith. "They are required by law, but unfortunately only about 22 percent of people have them installed."

A career in herpetology was not initially Smith's plan.

"I started with an interest in birds," he says. "At the time there was nobody doing herp work, so I took that on."

Smith earned his undergraduate degree in Natural Resource Management from the University of Rhode Island and then continued his education, receiving a

master's degree in ecology from

Frostburg State

University. In those days, Smith was interested in marine biology. "I wanted to be the next Jacques Cousteau," he recalls.

After a minor diving accident, Smith discovered an interest in wetland plants and birds, which he realized resonated with him more than marine biology. However, he never completely abandoned his original desires.

"I've spent a lot of time in salt marshes in Dorchester and Somerset counties," he says. "I've also dabbled in estuarine systems. It has really come full circle, and I love what I do."

Approaching his 26th year with DNR, Smith loves working with animals, but he really enjoys the people he interacts with the most.

"I get to interact with intelligent people from all walks of life," he explains. "People with great energy who are colleagues at DNR, conservation partners and citizen scientists." ■

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**Ana Berninger** was the spring intern for DNR's Office of Communications.



Diamondback terrapin  
NATALIE OVERHOLT

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